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LOCAL SPOILERS AND PATHWAYS TO RECONCILIATION: THE POLISH PERSPECTIVE ON THE POLISH-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS IN THE BORDERLANDS¹

Maciej Stępka - Agata Mazurkiewicz - Marcin Zubek*

ABSTRACT

In the last three decades Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation has taken a structured and regular form of an international dialogue dominated and controlled by central governments, which simultaneously diminished the importance of the local perspective. Yet, it is the regional level where the Polish-Ukrainian tensions have originally escalated at, and the local borderlands' communities have always played a crucial role in the inter-ethnic relations. That is why this article tackled the topic of Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation as framed by the Polish borderlands' elites, framing it with three dimensions of reconciliation: encounters, relationship, and innovation. It critically addressed the intractable tensions between Poles and Ukrainians in the borderlands, exploring the contemporary dynamics of distrust, narrowness and historical resentments which are continuously present in the local Polish narrative and stand in the way of reconciliation. The role of the European integration was viewed as an important context and a double-edged sword in the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. The article contended that it is crucial to look at Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation beyond the state-level and consider that without the involvement of the borderlands and their perspective, the process is still on a rocky road. The findings

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were based on primary and secondary sources, including semi-structured interviews conducted in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands.

Key words: reconciliation, borderlands, Polish-Ukrainian relations, local elites, European integration

Introduction

The 20th Century weighed heavily on the Polish-Ukrainian relations. The violent events of the Volhynia massacre, Polish retaliatory killings and forced resettlements of the Ukrainians in Poland left the two communities distanced, divided and unreconciled. Only after the fall of communism both nations could address these issues and embark on a path to reconciliation. This process has been primarily controlled by state actors and based on international dialogue which with time assumed a more structured and regular form of cooperation (Burlyuk, 2017). Thus, the reconciliation has been fixed in terms of actors and practices, which in a long run proved to be neither successful nor satisfactory. Following the 2015 change of government in Poland, it has been further troubled with re-emerged tensions, such as the radicalisation of narratives regarding the Volhynia massacre, conflictual statements of both parliaments, and re-emergence of nationalism and historically motivated politics (Gierak-Onoszko, 2016; Newsweek.pl, 2016).

Instead of focusing on the state-driven process of reconciliation, susceptible to political perturbations, we employ a different perspective by providing a detailed and in-depth analysis of how the Polish local community problematized and dealt with the reconciliation process in the context of European integration in the period directly preceding the deterioration of state relations. We believe that this local point of view introduces a new quality and dynamic into the reconciliation process. Firstly, it addresses the problem at its roots, focusing on the communities for which the difficult and violent past is still alive. Secondly, it allows looking at the problem from the perspective of the people, who are personally engaged and invested in the current Polish-Ukrainian affairs. Lastly, it enables the so far state-dominated process to open up to new stakeholders and ideas, possibly less sensitive to political fluctuations introduced by changing governments. As we recognise the importance of studying both Polish and Ukrainian perspectives, in this article we propose to focus on the Polish borderlands' elites. Thus, through the eyes of the Polish local elites, we show how the borderlands' community looked at the vital aspects of the Polish-

Ukrainian relations, how they positioned themselves within the reconciliation process, and how they perceived and interacted with their Ukrainian counterparts. In this way, we reveal a complex mixture of distrust, distance and historical resentment with a pursuit for meaningful cooperation and even partnership. In this intricate design, European integration visibly underscores local pathways to reconciliation introducing an optimistic yet distanced outlook on the future relations.

We begin our analysis with discussing the main characteristics of the borderlands' approach towards the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. The local perspective is framed with three dimensions within which reconciliation takes place: encounters, relationship, and innovation. The first two areas allow for uncovering how the borderlands' communities framed the reconciliation process in reference to the difficult past (encounters) and problematic present (relationship). In these sections we show which aspects of the reconciliation were defined as crucial and the most problematic to the process. The last dimension is focused on the European integration and its local interpretation as a possible innovative contribution to the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. In this section we discuss how the local elites imagined the impact of integration as a process intertwined with the future reconciliation between the Poles and Ukrainians.

1 Setting out the Stage. Historical Overview of the Polish-Ukrainian Conflict

The Polish-Ukrainian conflict originates from the unequal status of the two nations, which historically inhabited the same geographical area, with the Roman Catholic Poles constituting the dominant group in the province (Zhurzenko, 2013, p. 176; see also Wojakowski, 2015). With no realistic prospect of establishing an independent Ukrainian nation-state, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (*Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv*, OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrajinska Powstanska Armija*, UPA) openly turned against the Poles in the first half of the 1940s (Marples, 2006). The ensuing Polish-Ukrainian conflict took lives of up to 100,000 Poles and Ukrainians, starting with the so-called Volhynia Massacre perpetrated by UPA against Poles and the consequent spiral of retaliation engaging Polish partisans against Ukrainians (Snyder, 1999, p. 87). With the end of the Second World War, the newly formed communist government in Poland relocated the Ukrainian nationals to the Soviet Ukraine resulting in the

expulsion of 492,000 people (Snyder, 1999, p. 108). The violent phase of the conflict ended in 1947 when in the framework of “Operation Vistula” (*Akcja Wisła*) the last remaining Ukrainians were deported from Galicia to the North-Eastern Poland.

The atrocities of the 1940s left deep scars in the Polish-Ukrainian relations and reinforced divisions that still weigh heavily on the region. On the one hand, in the eyes of the Ukrainians, they were the weaker side, denied independence and nationhood, subjected to colonisation, polonisation and forceful relocation (Pasięka, 2014). On the other hand, in the Polish discourse, the Ukrainians were the ones who were trying to “stab” the re-established Polish state in the “back”, collaborated with the Nazis and massacred innocent civilians in 1943. Those two narratives are very much exclusive and based on self-victimisation. Hence, for the most part, the state-driven reconciliation relied on finding the lowest common denominator and avoiding addressing the root causes of the conflict. The issue of reconciliation does not officially appear until the 1997 Joint Communiqué on Agreement and Reconciliation, in which Polish and Ukrainian Presidents condemn both: the wrongdoings of the Poles and the “Operation Vistula”, as well as the killings of the Poles in Volhynia (President of the Republic of Poland & President of Ukraine, 1997). As **Kasianov** notes, the official framework for debating the problem focused on avoidance of mutual recriminations and an orientation towards the future, which however did not put an end to discussions in society, especially among intellectuals (Kasianov, 2006, p. 251).

In the next two decades, such state-centred reconciliation practices and discourse have been established and observed. The practice has been focused on high-level meetings filled with symbolic gestures, declarations and commemorative official visits, and the official reconciliatory discourse has been dominated by the (geo)political and economic dimensions (Burlyuk, 2017). The issues that concern the local communities appeared on the agenda only when they received considerable attention from the national public, as in the case of the devastation and renovation of the Polish *Łyczakowski* Cemetery in Lviv, repeatedly referred to by Polish and Ukrainian presidents (“Wizyta Prezydenta RP na Krymie,” 1998). In speeches given by the Polish Presidents, the reconciliation served as a tool to bring Polish and Ukrainian foreign policy agendas closer, as was the case in the aftermath of the 2004 Orange Revolution (“Polsko-Ukraiński gest pojednania,” 2006). This kind of “externalisation” was also visible in the attribution of blame in regards to the mutual violence. The Polish state level discourse was filled with the myth of

victimisation in this regard, putting part of the responsibility on the “Great Powers”, which incited the Poles and Ukrainians to murder each other (“Wystąpienie Prezydenta RP w Bykowni,” 2012). This sort of framing made it easier to avoid difficult bilateral issues.

Together with the 2015 elections in Poland and the change of the government, the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliatory dialogue deteriorated. An extreme example of this change is the unprecedented resolution of the Polish Lower Chamber of Parliament on homage to victims of genocide by Ukrainian nationalists on the citizens of the Second Republic of Poland in the years 1943-1945 (Sejm, 2016a). It was the first official document using the word “genocide” in relation to the Volhynia massacre, and has been widely criticised in Ukraine (TVN24.pl, 2016). Even though, just several months later, the Polish and Ukrainian Parliaments jointly adopted a reconciliatory Declaration of Memory and Solidarity calling for unbiased historical research and restraining controversies (Sejm, 2016b), a series of hostilities took place, including naming the Mayor of Przemyśl (a major Polish border-town) a *persona non-grata* in Ukraine² (Choma, 2017; Babakova, 2018). Similarly, with the 2018 amendment to the Polish law on the Institute of National Remembrance, Poland equated the crimes of Ukrainian nationalists with the crimes of Nazism and Communism in Poland – a move met with disappointment and deep concern of the Ukrainian side (Interfax Ukraine, 2018).³ Thus, the Polish-Ukrainian state-led reconciliation proved to be rather superficial, filled with spectacular symbolic gestures and susceptible to political fluctuations. What it often neglected was the local perspective which may constitute an important piece of the reconciliation puzzle.

2 Defining Research Methods and Research Sample

The following analysis is based on empirical material retrieved through 32 semi-structured interviews conducted in the historical province of Przemyśl (*powiat przemyski*), South-Eastern Poland. All interviews were conducted in Polish and then translated into English. The data was collected in two stages:

² This status was withdrawn after an intervention of Ukraine’s President Petro Poroshenko (Choma, 2017; Junko, 2017).

³ Due to diplomatic and internal pressures the Law and Justice government decided to tone the bill down. In January 2019, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal questioned the wording of this bill, especially in reference to the term “Ukrainian nationalists” as too broad and not properly defined.

September 2013 and January 2014. Our respondents were selected using the chain referral sampling technique and included representatives of such groups as: local authorities and administration (12 respondents), Polish customs and border officials (6 respondents), activists (9 respondents), entrepreneurs (5 respondents), journalists from local newspapers and radio stations (2 respondents) and educators (4 respondents). Some of the respondents represented more than one group.

These groups constitute the so-called “symbolic elites” who through “symbolic capital” exercise power over dominant discourses and narratives. According to **van Dijk**, they “may set the agendas of public discussion, influence topical relevance, manage the amount and type of information, especially who is being publicly portrayed and in what way” (van Dijk, 1989, p. 22). Within their particular domains, they control and shape public knowledge, affecting beliefs and attitudes towards the other (van Dijk, 1989, p. 22). Due to a limited access to representatives of the local clergy and their reluctance to express their opinions on the Polish-Ukrainian relations, in this study we concentrate on the perspectives of secular representatives of symbolic elites, in accordance with **van Dijk’s** original understanding of the term (van Dijk, 1989). We believe that the diversity within our research sample allows us to draw conclusions presented in this article, while at the same time we call for a supplementary in-depth research on the role of clergy in the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation (for an analysis of its role in the beginnings of this process see: Buzalka, 2006). The local elites are often identified as instigators and spoilers to reconciliation (Pasięka, 2016) but they also may be considered as possible mediators and facilitators of the process. That is why we frame them as powerful stakeholders who construct complex relationships and perspectives on the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. In this article we predominantly focus on the local elites, which engage Ukraine and the Ukrainian minority in Poland in a wide scope of activities ranging from bureaucratic, educational, cultural and political, to purely economic and technical. Such a research sample allows uncovering the local perspective on the process by defining its most sensitive and challenging aspects. At the same time, the symbolic elites are the most competent to propose solutions to defined problems.

The empirical material was supplemented with secondary sources from Polish local and national newspapers, as well as official documents and speeches. The analysis of this data allowed for a more comprehensive and detailed approach to the topic of local Polish perspective on reconciliation.

3 Theorising the Impact of European Integration on the Reconciliation Process

In order to understand the borderlands' perspective on the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation process, we develop a theoretical framework based on **Lederach's** assumptions on reconciliatory encounters, relationship, and innovation (Lederach, 1997). This approach allows for identification of dimensions sensitive to the local community and exploration of spoilers and enablers in the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. As noted by **Dwyer**, "reconciliation" has almost exclusively positive connotations, suggesting an end to antagonisms, the graceful acceptance of disappointment or defeat, the healing and repair of valuable friendships, and so on" (Dwyer, 1999, p. 82). In her view, reconciliation can only be achieved by incorporating perspectives of the antagonised "others". However, this process cannot end with simple gestures or declarations, but must involve the restoration and rebuilding of relations between communities, far exceeding coexistence. It also means for the two groups to accept each other as interdependent partners and develop mutual trust (Staub, 2000, p. 376). The literature can be divided into two basic approaches to achieving reconciliation: based on "emotionalism" and on "realism". Within the "emotional" perspective, reconciliation is "a difficult and delicate process that is not simply a matter of the head, but more so of the heart" (Fisher, 2001, p. 34). Reconciliation should thus be achieved through emotional healing based on an apology-forgiveness cycle and ability to express good feelings towards each other and towards their new relations (Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 369). Within the "realistic" approach, reconciliation should be a rational process, detached from the sense of victimhood and the emotional aspects of the conflict (Eisikovits, 2004). Instead, it should be based on pragmatism and presented in a political and realistic context (Auerbach, 2009, p. 292).

Lederach proposes to focus on three assumptions of reconciliation which allow defining spoilers and possible enablers to the process: "encounter", "relationship" and "innovation" (Lederach, 1997, pp. 25–27). According to the first assumption, reconciliation entails an encounter not only of people but also of various activities. It is a social space where people should be able to express their historical grievances, anger, and perceived injustices. As such, encounters focus on dynamic practices, addressing the difficult past. The second of **Lederach's** assumptions concerns the relationship which reflects the current state of affairs between conflicted communities. It should entail not only a

peaceful separation and disengagement, but allow for building personal and inter-communal relations based on long-term cooperation and trust. Finally, innovation requires looking at reconciliation beyond the mainstream of interstate political relations, operational modalities, and discourses (Lederach, 1997, p. 27). It is about opening up the reconciliation framework to new processes, ideas and actors while developing future pathways of cooperation.

In order to frame this innovative component, we utilise **Diez, Stetter** and **Albert's** interpretation of the transformative power of integration and association in border conflicts (Thomas Diez, Stetter, & Albert, 2006). The theory outlines several scenarios, which hypothesize on different types of impact of integration on the conflicted borderlands. The authors argue that the EU membership may compel the actors through "sticks and carrots" to "change their political attitudes and policies vis-à-vis the other party towards conciliatory moves" ("compulsory impact" of the EU; Albert, Diez, & S. Stetter, 2008). In this case, the EU serves as a framework, which pressures the conflict into resolution and reconciliation. Further, the integration may be an important "enabling factor" (Albert et al., 2008, p. 27), allowing conflicted parties to link their political agendas with the EU. By working jointly towards resolution and reconciliation outside often radicalized domestic politics and actors, both communities would be able to reconnect in common projects and sustain the relationship with the assistance of the EU. The theory assumes that this cooperation leads to a broader societal effect, contributing to the development of social networks across the border ("connective impact"; Albert et al., 2008, p. 28). **Diez, Stetter**, and **Albert** argue that thus construed relationship has a potential to transform the conflictual components of identity, introducing more inclusive patterns of behaviour into the borderlands ("constructive impact") (Albert et al., 2008, p. 28).

Using **Lederach's** perspective, we are able to explore the local approach to reconciliation between the Poles and Ukrainians. The assumptions of encounters and relationship serve as a basis to identify main spoilers of the process, while the concept of innovation, with help of **Diez, Stetter** and **Albert's** theory, is used in order to reveal possible solutions to the defined problems as presented by the local community.

4 Analysing the Pathways of Conflict and Reconciliation

In the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, the approach to reconciliation is shaped by direct proximity and interdependence with the "other", as well as still vivid

memories of the violent past. Here, both rationalism and emotionalism are reflected in the local perspective on reconciliation. On the one hand, the long-term involvement with the neighbour and the need for cooperation necessitates a more rational and pragmatic attitude towards the reconciliation. For this reason, the symbolic elites tend to factor in the political and realistic context of the borderlands and the economic condition of the region. On the other hand, the unresolved issues from the past and emotional orientations of distrust and pain call for the incorporation of emotional healing into the process. This mixture of approaches helps the symbolic elites to face the difficult past and to function in a borderlands' social and economic space, limiting the impact of resentments and historical grievances.

Yet, the region still witnesses conflict episodes which occasionally erupt on the edge of politics and history (see: Ślęzak, 2006). This is inconsistent with the official narrative produced by the state, which only focuses on the bigger picture, neglecting the local dilemmas and challenges of reconciliation. For this reason, the symbolic elites described the process mostly as superficial or incomplete, calling for the incorporation of the local level. As one of our respondents noted:

Everyone is a little bit responsible. (...) No one has better opportunities of crossing the borders and boundaries and engaging in dialogue than local authorities. The biggest influence, but also the least spectacular, because time-consuming, belongs to the teachers. The church has yet a different responsibility. (Teacher, aged 48)

By including the local level, the reconciliation process could achieve a higher saturation of different actors, activities, and perspectives. In this way, the process would be much more sensitive to the needs and challenges of the borderlands, thus increasing the chances for meaningful reconciliatory encounters and successful relationships.

4.1 Encounters, Truth, and Acknowledgment

Borderlands constitute a unique place of "encounters" between different actors and their activities, thus constructing a social and symbolic space for reconciliation (Kurczewski, 2015). These reconciliatory encounters create a possibility for contestation and discussion about antagonised worldviews and interpretations of common history. They can assume various forms of interactions, including casual conversations between individuals, educational

workshops, or dialogue between local authorities and NGOs. The purpose of reconciliatory encounters is to establish a form of communication, between and within groups, that allows addressing the difficult history and common issues “without getting locked into a vicious cycle of mutual exclusiveness inherent in the past” (Lederach, 1997, p. 26). In the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, reconciliatory encounters are limited by a distinctive nature of interactions between the two groups.

Wojakowski observes that the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands are predominantly narrow in terms of social space and socio-cultural interactions (Wojakowski, 2002, p. 123). The spectrum of interactions between the two ethnic groups is mostly limited to pragmatic and functional areas of activity such as border trade and technical cooperation between local and border authorities. This claim is mirrored in our empirical material, which indicates that the highest intensity of interactions can be observed in political-technical and economic realms. The space of reconciliatory encounters between the Poles and Ukrainians is therefore narrow, as their interactions are driven mostly by an expectation of financial profits and the need to solve ongoing problems. However, the local elites indicated that in order for reconciliation to be successful, more emphasis should be put on the encounters that address the problems of the past underlying the tensions in the region. As elaborated in one of the interviews:

We should talk and we should talk about everything. (...) we tend to talk only when something bad happens, or when we have to give a property to the Ukrainians, or when the Poles complain about their life in Ukraine. (Journalist, aged 47)

According to our respondents, the dialogue has to go much deeper than the technicalities of everyday life. Only then both communities will be able to address deeply rooted historical grievances and mutual accusations.

The symbolic elites indicated that the reconciliatory encounters between Poles and Ukrainians should be centred around the historical truth and supplemented by acknowledgment of the inconvenient facts. The historical truth remains highly contested and is a part of a political game between and within the states. Some of the facts are still challenged, including such basic aspects as the nature of the tragic events, the number of victims, identity of perpetrators and the role of both Poles and Ukrainians in the conflict (Copsey, 2008; McBride, 2016; Pasięka, 2016). As one of the interviewees observed:

The closer we are to the historical truth, the closer we are to each other and the bigger respect we have to the common history, peace and security. (Activist, aged 48)

According to the symbolic elites, the truth is not only important at the central level, but it also has a particular, personal dimension in the borderlands. It is fundamental for reconciliation in the local communities, small towns, and villages such as Pawłokoma and Piskorowice, where the inhabitants are still working through the past and unanswered questions about the fate of their relatives after the Volhynia massacre (Magierowski, 2016). In the borderlands the difficult history is still a sensitive issue and has to be handled competently:

The moment we start talking about the history and [Polish-Ukrainian] violence, which are inherent to this land - hatred resurfaces. (Local activists, aged 47)

At the same time, unsubstantiated claims about the historical events often fuel radical nationalistic attitudes and resentments towards the other. As pointed out in one of the interviews:

(...) if we falsify history or forget about it, then we leave the dialogue to instigators. If we talk about the truth, then we will make them powerless. (Local authorities official, aged 58)

Regardless of the nearly thirty years of reconciliatory efforts, the Poles and Ukrainians tend to view the past in black and white, struggling with acceptance of different shades of grey hidden in the opposing narratives and interpretations of their controversial history (Mazurkiewicz, 2015). The case of Polish historical re-enactment of Volhynia massacre in Radymno in 2013 shows how the one-sided narrative feeds into nationalistic tendencies and resentments towards the Ukrainians in the local Poland. As **Pasieka** shows, such practices are often politically instrumentalised and lead to dangerous monopolisation of historical narrative, destructive to the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation process (Pasieka, 2016). Another good example is a local conflict over the commemoration of **Józefat Kocyłowski**, the Greek Catholic bishop of Przemyśl, beatified by the Pope **John Paul II** (Ziętał, 2013). The local Poles perceive him as a traitor, a Ukrainian priest who blessed the volunteers for SS Galizien and collaborated with the Nazis. For the Ukrainians, he is a national hero and a martyr persecuted for supporting Ukrainian independence. What both sides seem to neglect are the middle-ground interpretations which describe **Kocyłowski** as a priest engaged in the Polish-Ukrainian dialogue and defiant towards the Nazis (Gorczyca, 2013).

Such missed opportunities of reconciliatory encounters at the local level may even evolve to high-profile spoilers to Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. The case of the Ukrainian monument in a cemetery in Hruszowice, near Przemyśl, aptly shows this form of negligence. The monument commemorating the Ukrainian Insurgent Army was illegally erected in 1994 and quickly became the source of Polish-Ukrainian controversies in the area (Ziętał, 2014). The local authorities pushed away the responsibility for dealing with the status of the monument by claiming it is not within their purview (Ziętał, 2014). Over the next years the monument was regularly and furtively devastated and rebuilt, feeding local resentments and uncovering the impotence of the local elites in mediating reconciliatory encounters (TVN24.pl, 2017). Eventually, the unresolved dispute has led to the involvement of the central government and destruction of the structure just before the 70th anniversary of the “Operation Vistula”. The Ukrainian Foreign Office described this action as a provocative attempt to divert the attention away from the Polish crimes against the Ukrainians (Wilczak, 2017).

These examples show that in many local conflicts, parties entrench themselves in their interpretations, losing an opportunity for establishing the common ground by acknowledging the controversies of the past. They attempt to literally and proverbially mark their “territory” with symbolic tokens such as cemeteries, monuments or commemorative plaques which represent exclusively their narrative and interpretation of history. This territorial struggle often assumes a violent form of dialogue in which both sides destroy and contest the symbols of the other, fuelling the “competition of victims” (Zhurzenko, 2014) and inhibiting the chances for meaningful reconciliatory encounters.

4.2 Relationship, Trust, and Asymmetry

While encounters focus on resolving past issues through various forms of interactions and activities, the relationship is oriented towards the current state of affairs, the realisation of common goals and sustainability of good relations. According to **Lederach**, reconciliation should engage antagonised communities in a sustained and peaceful relationship, maximising human interactions within the conflict setting (Lederach, 1997, p. 25). Thus understood, relationship reflects how the two communities are positioned towards each other, what are their attitudes, how they perceive their mutual interests and realise them.

In this context, the Polish-Ukrainian relationship in the borderlands represents another problematic factor in the reconciliation process. **Babiński** notices that even though the Polish-Ukrainian interstate relations are amicable, the violent history and unresolved issues between Poles and Ukrainians weigh heavily on the region, distancing the groups from each other (Babiński, 1997, pp. 65–80). After the Polish accession to the EU and the Schengen zone, this distance in the relationship has increased. The Polish-Ukrainian border has become much more than a demarcation line, turning into the Eastern frontier of the unified Europe (Babiński, 1997). This state of affairs has increased tensions in the local communities, reinforcing caution, distrust, and asymmetry in relations between Poles and Ukrainians (Babiński, 1999).

In terms of reconciliation, trust is the backbone of a healthy relationship. According to **Lewicki** trust is “a belief in the other, a tendency to attribute virtuous intentions to the other, and willingness to act on the basis of the other’s conduct” (Lewicki, 2006, p. 97). Without it, groups are unable to define mutual relations in terms of a partnership and often turn to competitive or even hostile behaviour (Colquitt & Rodell, 2007). At the same time, it is typical that communities which experienced outbreaks of violence in the past find it difficult to establish trust. It is no different in the case of local Poles and Ukrainians who still refer to each other as “backstabbers” (Smoleński, 2016). In the perspective of the symbolic elites, trust is a missing component in the Polish-Ukrainian relations in the borderlands, and consequently in the reconciliation process. This sense of distrust is grounded in the past and the feeling of victimhood. The stories of the massacres are still alive in the memories of our respondents and hamper their ability to open up and trust the Ukrainians.

There are very brutal descriptions of the events. And it was neighbours against neighbours. So those descriptions tell us to be careful. Because so what that we lived next to each other? And he was a direct neighbour, just next to me, we knew each other for years? One night he just came and slaughtered the entire family. So, it is not the best climate to build friendships... Because how close can we get so that I will be sure that he won't come tomorrow and stab me in the back? (Border official, aged 40)

This sense of distrust is not necessarily grounded in reason and personal experiences. As one of the respondents explained:

I would have some concerns [about partnering up with the Ukrainians], but I cannot say that I could substantiate this statement with any proof. I would say that it's a stereotype which I inherited while living in the borderlands. I

would be worried about my investment (...), that my money might be stolen. (Teacher, aged 45)

With such a low level of trust, reconciliatory relationships are difficult to sustain. This situation is further reinforced by a local perception of asymmetries in the Polish-Ukrainian relationship.

Due to intensive Europeanization, Poland has become a part of a specific EU technocratic and border regime. Our respondents described this regime as a symbolic wall built between the Poles and Ukrainians, which introduced additional tensions into the relationship in the borderlands.

In my experience, when we established the Schengen border and visas, the Ukrainians turned against the Poles. For them, it was the Poles who closed the border, who did not want them and created problems for them. But it wasn't our fault, it was our obligation. (...) [For the Ukrainians] it's not the EU that is the bad guy, it's us again. It spoiled our relationship. (Customs officer, aged 45)

The introduction of Schengen has strengthened an imbalance in the relationship, where the Poles once again are perceived as those who dictate the terms to which the Ukrainians have to comply. Taking into account the historical inequalities between Poles and Ukrainians, this situation can be considered as an important spoiler in building a positive relationship in the borderlands.

Asymmetry is also reflected in the perceived imbalance of reconciliatory efforts. This topic is especially sensitive in the borderlands, where reciprocity and symmetry in gestures are crucial for the sustainability of positive relationship (see also: Burlyuk, 2017). According to our respondents, the asymmetries revolve around property reclamation, treatment of minorities living in the borderlands and access to means of cultivation of national identity. As observed by one of the interviewees:

There is no symmetry. There was a huge fight for the Polish Cultural Centre and Consulate General in Lviv. We had the same problem with establishing there the Roman Catholic curia. It was really tense, and after some time the Ukrainians offered us a piece of land saying "if you want something, build it from scratch". (Activist, aged 45)

At the same time, many interviewees noted that even though not without controversies, the Polish local authorities granted support to the Ukrainian minority in Przemyśl, including substantial property rights, e.g. to the Ukrainian Cultural Centre and the Greek Catholic Bishop's Palace. In such a fragile undertaking as the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation, both sides need to have

a sense that they equally contribute to the process. In the Polish local perspective, this is not the case. The sense of asymmetry is a vital and persisting problem, introducing new layers of conflict into the relationship.

4.3 Innovation and European Integration

Innovation includes new methods and pathways of reconciliation. It aims to open up the process to unorthodox ideas and introduce new perspectives into reconciliatory encounters and relationships (Lederach, 1997, p. 25). It allows to move the process forward and escape the vicious circle of ineffective and superficial gestures. Innovation addresses the main reconciliation spoilers, enabling the conflicted parties to refocus their efforts on new projects and ideas. According to our respondents, thus understood innovation is difficult to define in the current state of affairs and is yet to be introduced in the future. Even though they believe that the reconciliation should take place at the local level, during the interviews, they repeatedly turned to European integration as a possible innovation – a process that could change the dynamics of another process – the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. In this way, the elites distance themselves from problem-solving, waiting for a better opportunity such as integration of Ukraine into European structures. At the same time, the symbolic elites have a rather rational and utilitarian approach towards the role of the integration. They believe that the EU is too distanced and detached from the nuances of the conflict in order to become the driving force behind the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation.

The EU could help, but it's not that easy. (...) These problems can only be understood by the people living in the borderlands (...). It can try to assist in other ways, mediate, but it should be the Poles and Ukrainians who work these things out. (Activist, aged 25)

Therefore, the interviewees suggested the possibility of mostly indirect and financial contribution of the EU to establishing reconciliatory encounters and relationships. This hopeful and optimistic outlook is not without reason as the Polish symbolic elites are used to thinking about the EU in utilitarian terms. For the locals, European integration is commonly understood as a funding scheme which has revived Polish economic and societal development.

Our respondents believe that the narrowness of interactions in the borderlands could be mitigated by further association and integration of Ukraine with the EU. This applies specifically to encounters which would be achieved through expansion of the existing reconciliatory projects and development of

new activities within the framework of Europe without borders. Currently, many Polish cross-border activists involved in the dialogue on the historical grievances complain about the technical and financial constraints which are preventing them from building sustained partnerships with the Ukrainians.

When the money stops, the common goals disappear. We do not have the funds to sustain the cooperation so everything falls apart. The [Polish-Ukrainian] borderlands are very poor, so we could use some sustainable and continuous EU funding. (...) However, it must be designed in a way that both sides are treated equally and can benefit from the funds in an equal manner.
(Activist, aged 60)

In this sense, the funding provided by the EU could have a “connective impact”, leading to a broader societal effect and development of social networks across the border.

Furthermore, in the eyes of the local elites, the EU could become a political platform facilitating a more structured and effective dialogue on truth and acknowledgment of controversial past. Here, the “enabling impact” of the European integration may encourage political actions and reconciliatory gestures that would be problematic under different circumstances. Both national and local political actors could use the EU normative and institutional framework in order to distance the reconciliatory politics from radicalised domestic parties and agree on matters that would otherwise create tensions at home (Shekhovtsov, 2011; Stepka, 2015). In this sense,

[t]he EU has a big potential to influence reconciliation. (...) I imagine that in the future the Union will become a mediator between us. Surely, such a situation would help us integrate, understand each other and apologise.
(Activist, aged 24)

Thus, the interviewees have an optimistic outlook on the Ukrainian accession to the EU which, according to them would strengthen this type of reconciliatory encounters and create a possible pathway of escaping the vicious circle of ineffective and superficial gestures often manifested in high politics.⁴

⁴ As indicated by Diez and Hayward in their study of the reconciliation process between the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the impact of European integration can be rather ambiguous and lead to mixed results. The European integration always has its “winners” and “losers”, and while contributing to wealth and redefinition of interests and identities of some actors, it may also lead to strengthening of divisions between “the Europeanised” and the people who have been left on the margins of the European project (see: Diez and Hayward, 2008).

Our data reveals the importance of European integration seen as an opportunity to reshape the present Polish-Ukrainian relationship and to decrease the distance between the two communities. The interviewees believe that the region needs success stories, positive narratives on the Polish-Ukrainian relations that would override the distrustful attitudes. In fact, this “constructive impact” of the EU could transform the underlying conflictual components of identities that are inhibiting the mutual trust. Positive experiences stemming from successful Polish-Ukrainian partnerships could gradually eradicate negative stereotypes and redefine the relationships in the borderlands. However, in order to do that, both sides need to (re)gain trust towards each other and learn to cooperate and work for the common benefit. Again, the financial assistance of the EU is seen as an important facilitating factor.

These [European] funds will make us [NGOs] work together as partners. The people will surely become more responsible for each other, conscientious and organised. (Activist, aged 24)

This way the “constructive impact” of the EU would help to turn the distrustful relationship into a more productive and balanced partnership.

The Polish-Ukrainian relationship is also suffering from a perceived sense of asymmetry resulting from implementation of the Schengen regulations and different expectations towards the reconciliation process. The removal of the problematic border regime would help to address one of those problems by including Ukraine in a common European framework. According to the local elites, after the accession of Ukraine to the EU

[t]here will be no physical border so there will be fewer reservations in our relationship. (Teacher, aged 45)

In this sense, the respondents indicated that the wall dividing the borderlands into “those who compel” and “those who comply” would cease to exist, thus mitigating mutual objections and the asymmetry in the relationship. Our interviewees also believe that the integration may help to make reconciliatory efforts more compatible and balanced.

(...) if we [the EU] urge such countries as Ukraine to introduce certain solutions, then as a consequence of integration it will be easier to communicate and cooperate with them. In a way, the EU can serve as a reconciliatory factor which will make us work and function together. (Teacher, aged 45)

Indeed, it is believed that the EU membership can have a “compulsory impact”, encouraging Polish and Ukrainian actors through “sticks and carrots” to adjust their behaviour into a more conciliatory.

Conclusions: A Way of Moving Forward?

The aim of this article was to explore and characterise the borderlands’ perspective on the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation, as framed by the local Polish symbolic elites in the period preceding the deterioration of state relations in 2016. Even though this perspective is not included in the state level, it does exist in the discourses of the borderlands’ elites. It represents a more insightful outlook on the reconciliation, attuning it to the nuances of the Polish-Ukrainian relations and complexities of the region. As we have shown, the local perspective can be framed in three main themes, each tackling different aspects of the reconciliation process: encounters, relationship, and innovation.

In this article, reconciliatory encounters were defined as a wide range of interactions which facilitate emotional healing between the conflicted parties and coming to terms with the difficult past. Our research has shown that this aspect of reconciliation is problematic from the local point of view. The Polish-Ukrainian borderlands are distinctly narrow in terms of interactions which are mostly pragmatic and focused on technicalities of every-day life. The Polish symbolic elites consider this problem as one of the major reconciliation spoilers. For them, the reconciliatory encounters between the Poles and Ukrainians should be deeper and address the problems underlying the tensions in the region. We have identified two focal aspects of these encounters: historical truth and acknowledgment of inconvenient facts. In the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, truth is very personal, as the inhabitants of the region still live in the past and work through the memories of the violent history. The truth would bring the two communities closer together and guarantee that the reconciliation is based on facts, limiting the influence of radicals and instigators. It, however, has to be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the controversial past, no matter how inconvenient. As suggested in the article, acknowledgment could be an opportunity in disguise, making the parties reflect upon their fixed positions and accept different interpretations of history which could create a common ground for reconciliation.

The local perspective on reconciliation is also reflected in the current state of affairs, here framed as a reconciliatory relationship. It is a continuous involvement

of antagonised parties, based on mutual trust, a realisation of common interests and sustainability of good relations. Our findings indicated that due to social and physical distance inherent to the borderlands such relationships between the Poles and Ukrainians are difficult to sustain on a larger scale. There is a strong sense of distrust grounded in the past, which makes it problematic to define and realise common goals, not to mention form lasting partnerships. Yet, the Polish-Ukrainian relations in the borderlands are still described in terms of asymmetries and imbalances between the groups. One of such asymmetries is ascribed to the EU and Schengen regulations, which introduced additional constraints in the borderlands and distanced the Poles and Ukrainians even further. The second type relates directly to the reconciliation process and the perceived imbalance of reconciliatory gestures and efforts on the Ukrainian part. These spoilers reflect not only on the condition of the current state of affairs but also reveal the underlying tensions which weigh heavily on the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliatory relationship.

Lastly, we focused our attention on innovation, understood as a search for unorthodox and new solutions to reconciliation spoilers. Our research has shown that the local elites do not see any immediate response to the defined problems, which in their opinion should be solved predominantly at the local level. Instead, they prefer to turn to more distant perspective – viewing the potential of Ukraine's integration with the EU as a sort of a “roadmap” to reconciliation. Even though the EU is perceived as detached from the regional problems, its financial assistance and power of influence are believed to play a role in the reconciliation. The local elites argue that the financial instruments of the EU could have a connective impact on Poles and Ukrainians, stimulating and reinvigorating reconciliatory encounters and relationship. With joint activities and positive stories of cooperation, both communities could start forming sustainable partnerships that could lead to a reconfiguration of antagonistic attitudes in the region. The elites also believe in the enabling power of the EU. By inclusion of Ukraine in the European structures, the relationship could be more balanced not only in the borderlands but also at the central level. In their perspective Poland and Ukraine could reach new levels of reconciliation through institutionalised dialogue far away from domestic, often radicalised and fixed political positions. Without a doubt, research on the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation is still an open chapter in social sciences and requires further and more innovative approaches. It is crucial to look at this process beyond the state-level and consider that without the involvement of the borderlands and their perspective, Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation is still on a rocky road.

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